DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 201 418 RC 012 604

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TITLE Rural Youth as a Factor of Rural Change.
PUB DATE 23 Mar 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the "Youth Sociology" Research Committee of the International Sociological Association (Fredeburg, Federal Republic of Germany, March 23-27, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Agents; *Community Change; Comparative Analysis; Decision Making; European History; Foreign Countries; Longitudinal Studies; *Personality Development; Rural Areas; *Rural Youth; *Social Change; Sociocultural Patterns
IDENTIFIERS *West Germany

ABSTRACT

In order to determine West German rural youths' involvement in and availability to the mechanism of social change, surveys of youth aged 17-28 in towns of less than 5,000 people were made in 1955, 1968, and 1980. Between 1955 and 1980 the social structure of rural youth changed dramatically, especially in employment. In 1955, 55% of rural youth worked in their parents' firms or were self-employed. By 1980, the rate had fallen to 13%. In the same time period, the percentage of nonemployed students among rural youth rose from 2% to 22%. In 1980, over 50% of rural youth had more than an elementary education, versus 8% in 1955, but the 1980 youth surveyed were less inclined to increase their work output. In 1980 rural youth were far more mobile, self-confident, and independent of their parents. The young were less conservative than expected, as 78% were in favor of following new developments and innovations. Males, non-farmers, youth no longer living with parents, high school graduates, and newcomers to the rural area were more likely than their opposites to promote social change. Rural West German youth today appear willing to cooperate to solve societal problems. (SB)

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ED201418

Rural Youth as a Factor of Rural Change

by

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RC 01 2604

Paper prepared for the
Conference of the Research Committee "Youth Sociology"
held at Deutsche Landjugend-Akademie Fredeburg, March 23-27, 1981

Rural Youth as a Factor of Rural Change

by Prof. Dr. Ulrich Planck, Universität Hohenheim [1)]

I would like to summarize briefly some main results of my own rural youth investigations as far as the topic "Rural Youth as a Factor of Rural Change" is concerned. I'm referring to three surveys representative for the rural youth in Western Germany and carried out in 1955, 1968, and 1980. The second and third survey was a follow up study fully comparable with the first one. "Rural Youth" has operationally been defined as the 17 to 28 year olds in communities of less than 5.000 inhabitants. The samples were choosen at random always at the same villages and small towns, and each sample included about 1.150 respondents. The respondents belong to the same age group but to different generations of experience which could be characterized as "sceptical generation" (SCHELSKY 1957), "ingenuous generation" (BLUECHER 1966), and "resigning generation" (van DEENEN 1979).

Formulation of the question

"Rural change" should be understood as a complex of structural development and crisises accompanying the process of de-agrarization, industrialization, and urbanization of the countryside. In the light of this radical social change the rural youth reacts as a kind of seismograph of the social vibrations and concussions, but it is also the object of changing factors, and one of the most important agents of change. The following statements focus on the latter aspect discussing the two problems:

1. How is the rural youth involved into the mechanism of rural change?
2. How is the rural youth available as far as rural change is concerned?

Mechanism of change

Question 1: How does the rural youth contribute to the rural change?

One thinks usually of revolutions or at least of revolts, demonstrations, strikes, protests, refusals etc., if the youth is under discussion as a factor of change. The best examples for that are the students' unrests in the late sixties. But the rural youth did not make headlines in the newspapers as students have done, and the young people in the countryside are not always talking about how to change the political system or the entire society. Of course, young rural people were sometimes engaged in meetings of protests, especially in connection with demonstrations against atomic-energy plants, against construction of new highways etc. in the surroundings of their settlements. But all these arrangements were conservative in nature, mainly directed against rural change, and rarely in favour of progress or conversion into a new political system. Nevertheless, the rural youth in Western Germany is deeply involved in rapid and radical social change

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of the countryside. There is a tremendous change concerning the external living conditions and the vital situation, especially education, employment, and leisure.

- Most of the small rural settlements, formerly independent administrative units, have become parts of larger communities by an administrative reform.
- Most of the small rural settlements lost their local schools, post offices, railway stations, police stations, town halls, as well as many shops, private offices etc.
- Most of the small rural settlements shifted from mainly agricultural oriented villages to residential quarters of commuters. Only 3 % of the rural youth are still living in agrarian communities, while 11 % are dwelling in agro-industrial communities, 12 % in trade-industrial communities, 69 % in industrial communities, and 5 % in service communities according to van DEENEN's classification.
- A quite new ethnical element in the villages are the so-called Gastarbeiter, labourers coming mainly from the mediterranian countries to Germany for work. They form about 3 % of rural youth population.
- Since the rural school consolidation has been performed, a differentiated school system is offered to rural children like to urban ones.

In many respects, the rural youth has been the object or even the victim of sweeping measures leading to rural change in the past. Yet, I risk the thesis that the rural youth is the most important element of rural change. The mechanism of change is, however, not a revolutionary one but an evolutionary one. The countryside is not changing through a single one great action like a legal land reform but the change is a result of countless small personal decisions inside the families. Public decisions and decrees provide more or less the frame for the private decisions. It's, however, astonishing, how little villagers are aware of the fact that their behavior consists of reaction to public created facts, or to put it in other words: they do'nt act but react. Political and public decrees are, indeed, more causes of rural transformation than means.

The present empirical investigations of the late decade point at the great signification of personal attributes for behavior. That means that the behavior of the rural population in its total is changing by the transformation of its structure. The social structure of the rural youth has a special meaning for two reasons:

(1) the variations of the social structure are by themselves an expression of social change,
(2) desplacements within the social structure of any population change the behavior and attitudes of a population.

Behavior as well as attitudes are changed in two ways which I will preliminary define as "habitual" and "structural". I would terme a change a habitual one in the case of adopting new attitudes and new pattern of life while the social structure as well as the roles of the actors remain the same. An alteration of status-positions and roles is not a prior condition of a habitual change but it can bring it about. Whereas, the structural change is due to the assumption of new roles and status-positions with specific attitudes and pattern of behavior.

Both kinds of mechanism could be examplified by the attendance at church. From 1955 until 1980 the rate of regular attendance at church decreased from 81 % to 37 % of the catholic rural youth. Why? - In

all social categories surveyed the service attendance was decreasing during the time considered because of secularized patterns of behavior (habitual change). Yet on the other hand the share of such social categories which use to attend services less often was increasing (structural change). The part of especially churchly persons (like unmarried native farm-girls) decreased, while on the other end of the continuum the part of especially anticlerical persons (like married immigrated non-farming employees) increased.

This double mechanism of changing the mode of life could be indicated by many other examples as to go in for sports or how to take a holiday. The increase of sport activities in rural areas from 27 % (1955) up to 63 % (1980) is due to the same mechanism. Eventhough all social categories are nowadays more active in sports as they were before, the traditionally active ones like the male employees show a strikingly high increase. Of course there are some general trends of new behavior too, for instance watching television was quite unusual to all rural people in 1955 but became the most common leisure activity of all categories surveyed until 1980. The structural change of the rural youth within this time is, indeed, much more dramatic. One of the most important structural change took place in the field of employment. The development between 1955 and 1980 is characterized by (see figure 1):

1. the rise of nonagricultural employees from 33 to 58 %,
2. the rise of nonemployed students from 2 to 22 %,
3. the decrease of farm hands from 6 to 1 %,
4. the decrease of self employed and family workers from 43 to 10 %, and
5. the reduction of young people engaged in farming from 40 to 7 %.

While in 1955 55 % of the rural youth were employed in their parents firms or run their own enterprises, in 1980 13 % only worked in their family enterprises but 87 % in non-family firms. This change in employment status as well as the high rate of students among the rural youth changed greatly the time-budget. Both the daily and the annual leisure time extended considerablely. The percentage of young people in rural areas without any annual vacation went down from 49 to 8 %, vice versa the percentage of persons enjoying more than 21 holidays yearly increased from 5 to 64 %.

The Disposition for Change

It should be noticed that some social categories are more accessible to new attitudes and pattern of behavior. Comparatively advanced are: (1) boys more than girls, (2) married or single people more than unmarried ones living together with their parents, (3) nonfarmers more than farming people, (4) graduates from secundary schools more than students from elementary schools, (5) newcomers more than old settlers. It was important for rural development in the past that all retarding categories lost in number, whereas the categories favouring social change show a definite increase. The socio-economic categories industrially oriented gained, however, not only in number but they increasingly took over the leading positions in the village by supersedeing the traditionally leading farmfamilies. The shifting of the "heavyweight" in favour of categories less dependend on tradition than farmers is advancing social changes in rural areas quite a bit more than the habitual change without altering roles only caused by the influences of massmedia and other contacts with the exterior system.

Table 1: Social structure of rural leading families

Social category	Percentage of leading families[1]		
	1955	1968	198o
Farm families	72	43	28
Craftsman and tradesman families	13	13	14
Emplyees' families (officials)	5	23	33
(Manual)workers' families	1o	21	25
Total	1oo	1oo	1oo

[1] Families in which at least one member keeps a leading position.

Rural youth as a changing force

Now let me throw some light on four aspects of the question wether the rural youth uses to be a changing force in rural society of Western Germany or not.

Free hand for personal decision making

Question 2: Does the rural youth have a full scope to develop new attitudes and find their own terms?

The point at issue is wether the adolescents have as much social distance to their family as they need in order to develop their own personality, and their parents give them as much cordiality as they need for their physical and emotional well-being. The majority of rural enjoys sufficently both free hand and family refuge. More than nine tenth of the rural parents let their adolescents free hands in all personal decisions. The influence of parents on the choice of profession decreased: the duty to take over the father's business from 18 to 6 %, the indispensability from parents workshop or farm from 9 to 0 %, the professional decision by the parents from 3 to 0 %. Only 2 % of the interviewed persons reported (198o) that their parents did not allow them to enter the profession of their preference.

The percentage of the young people working in the enterprise of their parents, fathers-in-law or other relatives went down from 38 % (1955) to 6 % (198o). Much more of the young people run their own home in 198o than in 1955 (35 versus 21 %) and less are dwelling together with their parents (59 versus 66 %). In 198o only one fifth of the age group surveyed depended financially from their parents.

In 198o only a small minority of about 2 % of the respondents felt that their parents decide for them as far as their personal affairs are concerned. The number of young couples taking over their parents mode of living is rapidly decreasing. Usually the parents have a rather liberal attitude, and the young couples practice neolocality. But most parents are ready to give their youngsters some good advices if they are asked for. In contrary, the social control of the rural parish maintained rather than the patriarchal rule within the families. Yet there are enough possibilities nowadays to escape the closeness of the village. Nearly each rural juvenil has a motor-bicycle or a motor-car to his disposal and possesses also a driving licence.

Work motivation

Question 3: Is the rural youth able and motivated to act?

The ability to transform the countryside into a modern living space depends highly from the educational level of the younger generation and from the willingness to learn perpetually. There is a consens that elementary schools and vocational schools are not able to convey all the knowledge needed. The educational progress since 1955 is however, remarkable. While in 1955 only 8 % of the respondents has attended more than an elementary school, the percentage was in 1980 50 %. For the most young villagers the vocational training ends no longer with the compulsory attendance at a vocational school. But sill the majority of them does not take the chance for further education by own impulses.

Present abilities and acquired knowledges are fully mobilized, if a person is ready to use them with the aim of high efficiency. Nearly one quarter of the respondents voted 1980 vor increased output vice versa 37 % in 1955.

Table 2: Opinion of the rural youth concerning efficiency

Opinion	1955	1980
Increased output	37	27
Constant output	55	66
No answer	8	5
Total	100	100

The general trend to refuse the maximal efficiency reached also the rural youth. If one draws the conclusion from the answers to the willingness to work, one can hardly expect that the majority of rural juvenils is ready to compensate the lack of education and training. An unsuitable consciousness forces the deficits of the infrastructure in rural areas.

Innovation and rationality

Question 4: Is the rural youth willing and ready to make decisions in order to achieve innovations?

The surveys show that young country people are less conservative and more accessible to innovations than they are thought to be. More than seven of ten respondents indicate positive attitudes towards new developments: they like to adopt modern achievements, they believe a good vocational training to be the best foundation for their future life, they like to travel around, and they have many various contacts.

Table 3: Question: "Do you deem it advisable to follow the ways approved or do you like to prove something news?"

Answer	1955	1980
To follow approved ways	38	21
To prove new things	58	78
No answer	4	1
Total	100	100

The trend goes clearly for innovation, but rational acting is decreasing as table 4 indicates. Only half of the respondents think of themselves as rationally motivated, i.e. they calculate their chances in important decisions to be successfull.

Table 4: Rationality of acting

Answer	1955	1980
Calculate success of decisions	62	51
Decide according my feeling	31	44
No answer	7	5
Total	100	100

Cooperation

Question 5: Is the rural youth willing to cooperate in order to master the coming problems with joined forces?

The countryside cannot be developed without a high degree of cooperation of the people living there. But the question cannot be answered precicely from the present data whether the young generation is able to cooperate or not. However the willingness to cooperate is manifested in several fields. The membership in informal and formal groups could be a good indicator of the ability for intercourse. 84 % of the respondents reported (1980) regular meetings with friends. Another 63 % are members of one or more clubs. The participation on the club activities are often justified by altruistic motives. The answers to the question "Would you participate at local common projects?" indicate still more the readiness of the majority of the juvenils to work together for common goals and tasks.

Conclusion

It could be concluded out of the findings in three surveys that the rural youth in Western Germany is in 1980 much more selfconfident, independent in decision making, and openminded than it was in the middle fifties. The majority of the juvenils looks confidently and optimistically at the future. Most young people are willing to become a part of the industrial society, and find their way without any trouble worth mentioning. Parallel to their entrance into modern professional life they adopt the patterns and values of the modern industrial society. New social schemes were introduced and accepted the easier the higher the level of education, and if the older generation was openminded and understanding. Frustration due to rural backwardness are not anymore taken as unavoidable. There are enough means and ways to escape. Therefore, a certain danger exists that just the politically interested, progressive and active persons as well as those who are striving for higher living standards will move away, rather than become the driving forces for the necessary social change in rural areas.

Notes:

For more information see:

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Eberhard Platz: Freizeitverhältnisse und Freizeitverhalten der Jugend auf dem Lande (Leisure conditions and leisure behavior of the rural youth), Ph.D. Thesis Hohenheim 1971, 29o pp.

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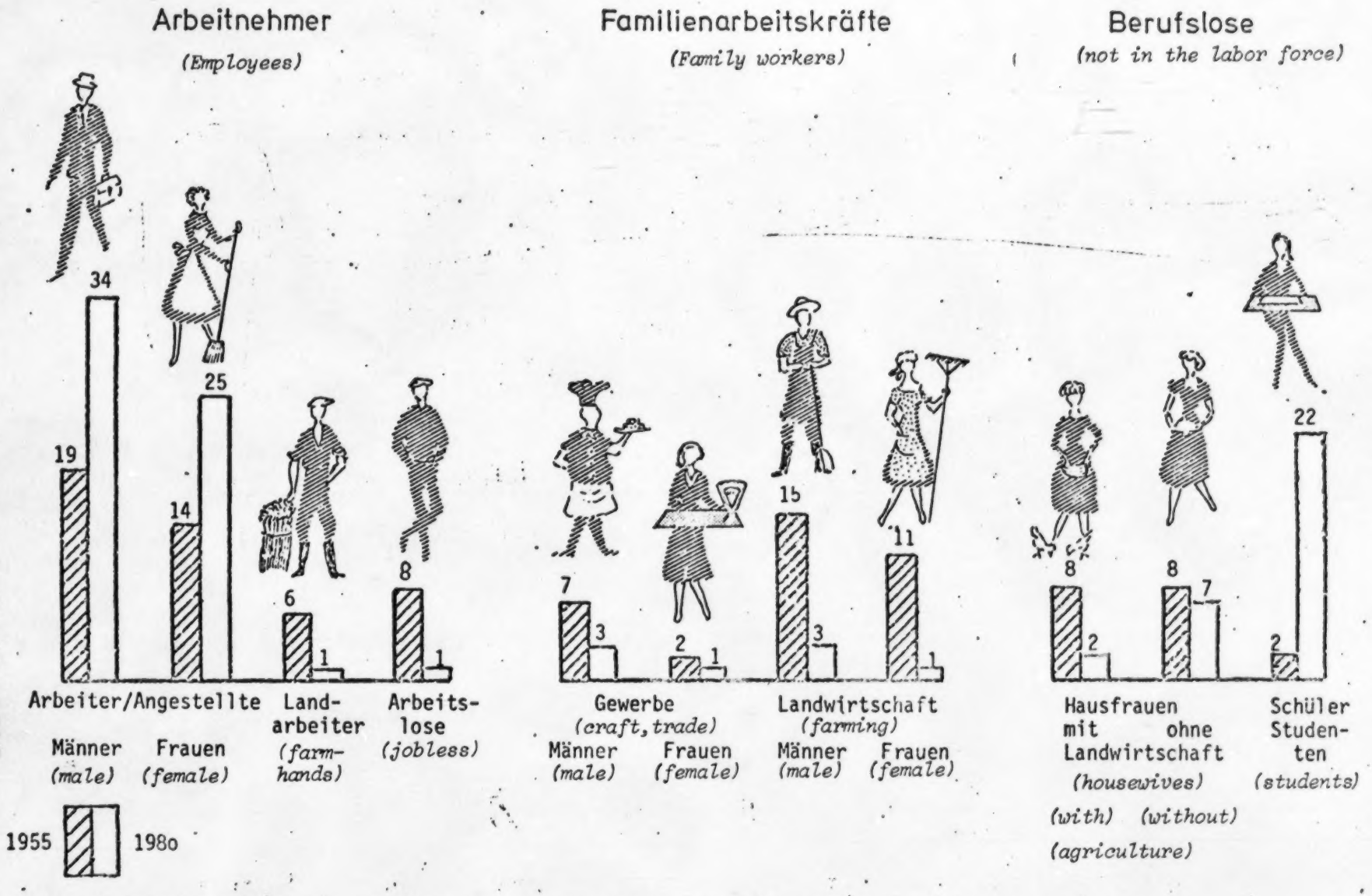

Figure 1: Erwerbsstruktur der 17-28jährigen auf dem Lande, Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1955 und 1980

(Employment structure of the 17-28 years old rural population in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1955 and 1980)